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## THE PHANTOM WORLD.

By the late Wm. North.

Thought and being are one.—HEGEL.

**WHEN** a child I was essentially a phantasmist. My nights were crowded with a series of ever-recurring dreams, which too often degenerated into hideous nightmares. My days were filled with fancies—to which an all-dominating imagination gave almost the substance of reality. Common life had scarcely a hold upon me: I had none of the sharpness of other precocious children. I was easily duped in the simplest matters, because I did not understand that there was any utility in deception. Being absolutely pure in soul and innocent in heart, I was set down as mysteriously vicious, because my teachers could not understand me.

But, in one respect, I was far in advance of ordinary children. My ideas of love and beauty were developed to a degree, even at four years old, which to many would appear incredible. I had indeed but one master passion; and it was only at a later period that the constant thwarting of my imperious cravings for spiritual and physical sympathy aroused to violent activity a fierce combativeness, which has often since led me to the commission of acts of sudden violence and startling retribution, not originally natural to my character.

One fancy, one dominant vision, haunted me incessantly—almost from my cradle. At first it was a beautiful child; then an exquisite young girl; then, as I myself became a man, a superb and glorious specimen of ideal woman. In reality, I thought of nothing else. My school-tasks were performed in order to get rid of an extraneous annoyance, and return to my fanciful world. My games were mere reactions of the bodily functions of the brain, essential to health and sanity. I was always pondering over the attributes—trying to picture the shape and features of my fantastic princess, and holding everlasting imaginary conversations with that essential being.

If these details appear tedious, or strike the reader as common to many others than myself, I can only regret that they are indispensable to the proper under-

standing of my after-life. Moreover, I wish it to be believed that these dreams of mine were strictly absorbing, and by no means exceptional states—that I took no interest whatever in any of the ordinary objects of children, boys, and youths, approaching adolescence.

On attaining puberty, a vast change came over me, and for some years I was swept along by a current of passion and adventure, which, at the age of two-and-twenty, left me a sort of moral shipwreck, alone in the world—limited in means, though for the time independent in position.

My early intercourse with the world had brought me nothing but mortification, bitterness, and disappointment. My appearance was singularly delicate and effeminate. My complexion was fair as a young girl's—my soft blue eyes and silky hair would have been admired in a woman. My figure, though accurately proportioned, had neither the imposing height nor the robust development required to carry off the girliness of my countenance. At eighteen the young ladies called me a "pretty boy," asked me if I used pearl-powder, and playfully kissed me. But they had *other* looks for their whiskered, *manly* admirers. In such presence I was forgotten, or treated as a mere innocent youth. Unlike my accursed preceptors, the cruel fair ones would not even give me credit for viciousness. They simply held me to be a milk-sop. To illustrate this fully, I will describe a scene which took place on my twentieth birthday.

I had then been residing for nearly two years in the house of a distant female relative, whose niece, Aurelia, was a lovely girl about my own age, magnificently developed; with large, dark-brown eyes, splendid shoulders and arms, and a form which the fairest of the graces might have borrowed without blushing.

Aurelia was a fine girl, and had a noble nature; but she could not see in me that chivalrous and gallant cavalier I was so desirous of impersonating. She knew I adored her—had adored her from the first; but she could not look upon me as a serious lover. She played with me gracefully—enchantly; but, still—it was but play.

One day I resolved upon an explanation—I could bear the trifling no longer.

"Aurelia," said I, "my dearest cousin!

*I love you!*" and I took her hand passionately.

Aurelia laughed gayly.

I became suddenly sad—almost severe. I stood erect, and said—"Why do you laugh?"

"It is so absurd, you foolish boy: pray do not talk such nonsense."

"Look at me!" said I, bitterly.

Aurelia looked. This time she did not smile; for there was a wildness in my gaze that alarmed her.

"You prefer John Riversham to me?"

"Mr. Riversham is a *man*," said Aurelia.

"Nearly a year my senior," I added, stung to the quick by this unpardonable insult.

"Mr. Riversham is capable of protecting a wife," said Aurelia, proudly.

I saw she loved the man—as it chanced, a despicable puppy, but with the face of a dragon.

"Are you sure that he can protect himself?" said I, savagely.

"Against impertinent boys?" said my cousin, insultingly.

"Against a *man*!" said I still more vindictively. "Why girl—this fellow was caned by my hand but *yesterday*! and the provocation was one in which *your* name figured—I beat him like a dog! He does not *pretend* to fight. Is that enough?"

"Yes, you wicked boy! enough of boasting and falsehood for one day. Leave this room, sir!"

I burst into tears.

"Aurelia," I cried, "have pity on me! what I have said is the truth, though passion alone drove me to utter it so brutally. Do not judge me by appearance: give me *hope*—render my character justice. How often have you hinted that I was timid, effeminate, incapable—and how patiently have I borne all!"

"I do not believe you; and even if there be any truth in what you say, no doubt Mr. Riversham spared you out of pity!" cried Aurelia, crimson with passion.

"*Perhaps!*" said I, with sarcastic emphasis; and without another word I left the room and the house. How I wished that Riversham had been a fighting man; but he was a "spotted" coward, and my affair with him was at an end.

As for my cousin she hated me ever afterward—and I pitied her. We always

affect to pity those whom we despise in fact.

She married Riversham.

One or two similar repulses, though not carried to the same length, completed my disgust for society and the women it produced. As for women of a different class, they inspired me with positive aversion, save as a passing distraction.

With every day I shrank more and more from the discords of actual life, and gave myself up more to poetry, study, and day-dreaming. My old childish fancies came back upon me with renewed force, and my dreams by night became an object of envy to my waking consciousness. Still, notwithstanding Bulwer's story\* (which, like all Bulwer's metaphysical attempts, is a blundering failure), no man can make the ordinary kind of dreams, or dreams proper, a real source of happiness.

It occurred to me, therefore, to try a novel experiment. Having minutely studied the phenomena of sleep and dreaming, I summed up the objections to dreaming, as a chosen condition of existence, under four heads.

1. Uncontrollability.

2. Indistinctness, confusion, and tendency to metamorphosis, or crisis inducing awakening.

3. Consciousness of unreality, even while dreaming.

4. Impossibility of perpetual sleep.

How far these objections might be overcome by others I did not pretend to say; but to me they appeared radically insurmountable, and still do so at this moment.

I then contrasted dreams with waking imaginations, or castles in the air; and perceived that the latter were comparatively free from all the above objections, excepting the third—that of unreality to the consciousness. *There* dreaming had an obvious advantage—for it produced positive illusion, however transitory; while mere waking imagination could scarcely be said to approach that point of marvellous coincidence between the material and the spiritual existence.

Given then the problem to produce an intermediate state, in which the vividness of the most real dreams should be superadded to the voluntary creation of the clearest and most consecutive fancies.

This problem I hope to solve.

I knew that hallucinations were common, in which men perfectly awake, and in broad daylight, saw things which had no positive existence with perfect distinctness. It is true, these visions were involuntary. But what was volition? Did not every combination made by the mind spring necessarily from one centre of action? Was *will* indeed anything but modified *impulse*? Was not the soul, the real being, in fact a vital source of power, a spiritual sun, emitting rays in every direction, these rays being broken, reflected, and refracted entirely according to the media they encountered? Could I not so modify my spiritual radiation as to surround my focus of perception and sensation with images and feelings of my own selection? Was not, in fact, the conceiving so tremendous an idea in itself a step toward its realization?

I further reflected that as every faculty of mind and body was strengthened by practice—witness the effect of gymnastics, and of the exercise of the memory or of the study of mathematics—so might I, by continually making powerful efforts of imagination, so far exalt the power as to obtain over it a tangible and positive control.

Had I imparted my intentions to any one, my experiment would certainly have been regarded as a deliberate attempt to drive myself mad. I therefore made all my arrangements quietly, shut myself up in a suite of rooms, which were only to be entered for purposes of order and necessary supplies, during my brief daily absence for the purpose of exercise, and devoted myself to the absorbed contemplation of the ideal world.

My purpose was to concentrate the whole force of my imagination upon one image of incomparable female beauty, until from being a mere shadowy fantasy, the creation of my soul should become a plain and indestructible vision; nay, I even indulged the hope of endowing my phantom-mistress with qualities palpable to the other senses, and of thus living the remainder of my life in a delicious trance or enchanted lunacy, which should to me supply all the enjoyment which the common world denied. Little did I think that for a brief space I should invade the very empire of the gods and enjoy an existence—which I will not describe by anticipation.

But before I could commence my dar-

ing experiment in earnest, a certain physical preparation was indispensable. Active imagination and a hearty or even healthy appetite for food are irreconcilable. A severe course of diet and study was necessary to drive sensuality from its strongholds. Just as a prize-fighter or a pedestrian goes into training for *his* business, did I, the sportsman of *thought*, prepare myself for *my* undertaking.

At the end of three weeks I had gradually reduced my system to that state, when the appetites are comparatively dormant, while the nerves are exquisitely sensitive. I had become disinclined to sleep, clear-headed, and enthusiastically enamored of my scheme.

My food was a slice of dry toast and tea for breakfast, and often little more for dinner. Although I went out into the open air in my garden, and lounged upon the grass, I now took no exercise worthy of the name, and far from drinking wine or spirits, quenched my thirst with effervescing drinks of a tendency opposed to stimulant.

Thus, after reading Shelley's poems, Hoffmann's tales, several of Balzac's most spiritual romances, a little of Alfieri, some Lamartine, Tennyson, Goethe, Shakspeare's Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, and indeed all his plays but the comedies and earlier tragedies, with an occasional dive into Herodotus, Homer, and Æschylus, Dante, and Gibbon, the Hindu Vedas, the Zendavesta, the Koran, and the Bible—I found my brain in a state of perfect activity, full of images, free from all lymphatic languor, and thirsting with wild emulation for the indulgence of its own *creative potency*. Such was the effect of my training bodily and mental. During all this time I neither visited nor received visitors. I conversed with no one; and the silence in which I lived was only broken by the strange songs which I composed and sung—echoes, perhaps, of Mozart, Cimaroso, Weber, Meyerbeer, or other of my old musical idols—echoes strangely varied and confounded with new and marvelous conceptions of my own, which I shall soon have further occasion to allude to.

It was now sublimated and subtilized to the height of the most transcendental state of thought, and the most ethereal condition of body, that from a chaos of shadowy heroines freshly presented to my mind, I commenced, like a spiritual Frankenstein, the elaborate construc-

\* In the Pilgrims of the Rhine.

tion, or rather evocation of my phantom goddess.

Like Minerva, from the brain of Jupiter she sprang armed with—not spear and shield—but ineffable beauty and majesty from the *adytum* of my soul. Like Venus rising from the sea, she arose from the ocean of my thoughts—no vague conception—no fleeting fancy—but from the very first, a personal distinctive, individualized creation. Vague and phantasmal, it is true, in outline, certain and immutable in essence.

I said, "Come thou, and thou only, my embodied dream of beauty, my perfect spirit bride!" and she came, veiled, but immutable, of unearthly, but of permanent texture. By day and night I contemplated her, till the pictured shape became more and more substantial; till the blue eyes deepened, and the white shoulders brightened, and the gold-tinged hair glittered into visible actuality—until she stood before me, or hovered round me, a thing to gaze on without fear of vanishment or fading disillusion, till, in one word, I *saw* my dream-girl even as I saw my own image in the mirror!

Scarcely had the phantom become thus incarnate, than I became aware of the astounding phenomenon that, having once acquired the power over matter, and achieved the masterpiece of my ambition, all minor details and accessories, locality, and scenery, required but an effort of my imagination, and straightway they became apparent to the senses.

And what may appear more surprising—if indeed there be anything surprising in so simple a matter as intensified imagination—is, that at the same time I found myself possessed of a power over *sound* which imparted to my whole experiment a new and dazzling grandeur of voluptuous enjoyment. All who have had patience to read thus far, must have felt that a grand opera, of all descriptions of dramatic representation, approaches nearest to perfect illusion, and is at the same time the very highest form of artistic recreation yet known to man. The spirit of the *master*, living in every tone, cadence and harmony of sounds, wraps the whole in a unity of effect, which in tragedy, where all depends upon the actors, is impossible. Besides music intoxicates the soul, throws it into an abnormal state of exaltation, and annihilates the absurdity of details in the embracing atmosphere of its enchantment.

And I—I had but to *think* harmony, to hear it. An orchestra of infinite magnificence and extent had become the organ of my will. All limits to tone were, for me, annihilated. The awful depth of my immeasurable score was lost in the abyss, the piercing ascent played like lightnings amid the clouds, while distant echoes sent back everlasting accompaniments from the farthest eternities, world without end!

I did not believe that mortal could have listened to such music, and lived. Involuntarily—at least so it seemed—I composed now a perpetual series of tremendous symphonies, full of the sublimest variations and transitions. The trumpets of ten thousand angels; the mighty harps of countless Titan hosts; the drums of legioned thunder-gods—what words, what images can I find to convey any impressions of these supernal vibrations of the universe which emanated from my silent brain, giving a hundred-fold vividness and truth to the visions by which I was begirt, and amid which I lived, and had my being!

I now began to hold conversations with Amata, the name I had given to my phantom beauty—conversations, which it is impossible to record, since no earthly language could convey the meaning of those mysterious dialogues, or more correctly speaking, *duos*. Our language was melody, and we never wearied of its interchange.

Nevertheless, I had not hitherto dared thoroughly to *trust* my subjugated senses. A hideous dread of a more hideous awakening, occasionally stole over me, and I at length resolved to possess all or nothing, to stretch my acquired supernatural power to the utmost, and decide my fate forever. Hitherto, I had not dared to stretch forth my arms toward Amata. I had been content to dream of burning kisses and passionate embraces, for my dreams were but reflections of my waking hallucinations. But now, with a desperate resolution, like ancient wizard evoking the god of evil, and risking salvation upon the chance, I threw all my life into one supreme volition, and exclaimed to the angelic shape that, with loosened floating robes of diaphanous texture stood glowing in beauty before me, "Come to my heart, Amata! let me live in thee, or die in my despair!"

And lo! immediately, like a white bird settling on a bough, did the supposed

phantom Amata glide smiling into my arms, fixed upon mine her dewy lips, upon mine her deep blue eyes of eternal love, and press to mine her snowy breast, from which no mortal sculptor might dare to model! Her radiant hair fell down in silky profusion over both our shoulders; with unutterable triumph and joy I passed my hand over her hair, and skin smoother than satin or ivory, and I exclaimed, wildly,

"Amata, Amata! whence comest thou? Art thou, indeed, but a delusive phantom? Shall I lose thee as I found thee? Art thou mine or mystery?"

"Fear not, beloved one!" murmured Amata, in tones more sweet than sounds a crystal struck by rod of silver. "What can man conceive, that Nature yields not?"

And even as she spoke, vast chords began to swell, and the lightning tones to dart, and the deep drums of the abyss to thunder, and all the universe to vibrate in sonorous harmony, as with my lips glued to Amata's, her bosom pressed to mine—I slept in matchless ecstasy!

Thus did I cross the rainbow-bridge, Bifrost, from earth to heaven, from Midgard to Valhalla. And which of Odin's Valkyrs could rival *my* Amata? \* \* \*

Facile is the descent of Avernus! Rapid is the voyage from the radiant revels of Valhalla to the infernal shadows of the mist-world Nifelhém, cold and sombre Hell of the deep-souled, solemn Northmen!

Where am I?—what hideous world is this, in which fiends beset my path, that glare upon me with cold hungry eyes, then vanish before the flash of my ever sheathless sword? What phrenzied ghost stalks grimly through the night's black kingdoms, outlawed of gods and men—spirit of despair and vengeance?

Where is Amata—*my* Amata? Answer me, ye fiends of darkness, on whose heads glitter diadems of ice, on whose bosoms shine stars and crosses beset with hail-stone pearls!

Where is Amata?—where is the dead minstrel's child—the echo of my dream, the true, the glorious Amata? Broad, broad is the gulf, broad as the wild Atlantic! and there comes a whisper in the wind—a whisper from Amata,

"I come, I come, beloved one!"

"Daughter of my soul, mine—*mine* forever!"

No phantom is AMATA.